

## SAMPLE ESSAY

### “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain”

As one of Dickinson's most notable poems about her recurring theme of death, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” explores the speaker's descent from sanity to madness. Dickinson attempts to explain this experience through the use of an extended metaphor, a funeral, which encompasses the entire poem. The speaker compares her mental downward spiral with the careful procession of a funeral, and the contrast of the two dissimilar events adds to the mood of helplessness and isolation. “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” aims to put into words an experience that cannot be described very easily. In order to replicate the feeling of insanity, Dickinson uses a wide variety of literary techniques that include her powerful symbolism, imagery, and structure.

The funeral in itself is the principal symbol of this poem. The opening line presents the reader with the idea that the funeral, although it is happening inside the speaker's head, is still very real. “I felt a funeral in my brain / And mourners to and fro” (1-2). The funeral serves not as a symbol of a physical death, but instead as the final step into nothingness and the end of all reason. The brain's dual meaning of a physical organ and as the abstract idea of an entire funeral procession provides the setting, but also signifies that the speaker's brain, a once orderly place, is struggling to hold onto its sanity. However, in the first stanza it seems as though the speaker is still grasping onto the very last bits of reason she has left. “And mourners to and fro / Kept treading, treading, till it seemed / That sense was breaking through” (2-4). The “mourners” are not there to mourn at all; they are at this funeral to ensure the speaker is pushed further to the breaking point. Daniel Moran, a specialist in British and American literature, points out, “the mourners that keep ‘treading, treading’ in her brain represent the first signs of the impending catastrophe.” The relentless treading of the mourners guarantees that this imaginary funeral procession will go on until the speaker has completely broken down. In the second stanza another symbol meant to allude to the speaker's approaching doom appears in the form of a simile: “And when they were all seated / A service like a drum / Kept beating, beating till I thought / my Mind was going numb” (4-8). The continuous pounding of the drum, which symbolizes an impending force, drives the speaker to a point

where she cannot make sense of what is happening to her. In the fourth stanza, yet another symbol appears, the bell. "As all the heavens were a bell / And Being but an ear / And I and silence some strange race / Wrecked, solitary here" (13-16). The bell represents an impending force that is so loud and threatening that it is inescapable. Daniel Moran adds, "it seems 'As all the Heavens' are one great bell and the speaker's whole being is 'but an Ear' so that the speaker cannot recall a time when she could not hear the tolling bell." The introduction of the bell's clangor adds a sense of hysteria, as the speaker acknowledges that the end is quickly approaching. Trapped by this inescapable power, the speaker is reduced to nothing. She is now "but an ear" (14) and "I and silence some strange race" (13) meaning she feels separate from any sense of normalcy that ever existed in her life. The ear, the bell, the mourner's, and the funeral are not what they seem on the surface. By choosing simple, common elements of everyday life and pairing them with dark, dual meanings, Dickinson effectively creates a sensation of panic and helplessness.

Because this descent into madness is so difficult to describe to one who has never experienced it, Dickinson makes use of vivid imagery that builds in order to convey this abstract idea. One of the best examples is stanza three: "And then I heard them lift a box / And creak across my soul / With those same boots of lead / Then space began to toll" (9-12). At this point the speaker hears the coffin being lifted, being carried across her soul by the mourners, and then all reality seems to hang in suspension. The reader can practically hear the creaking of the coffin and feel the heavy footsteps of the mourners pushing down further and further into oblivion. As a poet and expert in American literature, Paul Pineiro feels that in this poem Dickinson suggests that there are worse fates than death, there is nothingness. Dickinson creates frightening images with simple descriptions or in some cases, lack of them. He says, "The narrator repeats her earlier report regarding mourners footsteps but this time seems to be releasing the perspective of an entombed, internal self into perhaps an even more frightful, detached, abstract void." Such carefully chosen words are extremely effective in drawing the reader into the speaker's position. Readers can almost feel their sense of reality slipping away as an inexorable force traps the speaker of the poem not

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inside a physical coffin, but empty space, which is even more terrifying. When the speaker states “Then space began to toll” (12), it seems to be the exact opposite of imagery, which illustrates the hopelessness of the situation further. How can space, an empty void, begin to toll?

Equally as important as Dickinson’s use of symbolism and diction is the unique way in which she concludes the poem. The entire poem is written in a consistent (abcb defe, etc.) rhyme scheme, with both end rhymes and slant rhymes. Uncharacteristically of Dickinson, her signature dashes do not appear until the final stanza. This may be for a number of reasons. The final stanza concludes: “And then a plank in reason broke / And I dropped down and down-- / And hit a world at every plunge, / And finished knowing--then--” (17-20). The very last line, in itself, serves as the finale for the speaker’s descent to insanity. The dashes seem to portray a sense of hurriedness and panic that increases until finally the speaker is cut off and her fate is unknown. Pineiro believes that the dashes “surround this final moment and the final word *then* as if to mark the black-hole limbo wherein the echo of the voice continues to reside in silence. Ironically, the poem underscores its author’s understanding of her own poetic process by showing the demise of it.” It is as if Dickinson abandons her usually quick, hectic style that includes dashes after each incomplete thought in order to utilize this style at the end of “I felt a funeral in my Brain” to signify the speakers inability to continue further because she has passed into an empty void and cannot return. The way that Dickinson ends this poem adds to the sense that the speaker has entered a free fall into nothingness and left her rationality behind.

Emily Dickinson’s “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” strives to do the impossible: portray in words an idea so abstract that it cannot be explained to those who have never experienced it. In her attempt to replicate insanity Dickinson utilizes a various methods to convey a loss of self. The poem’s many compelling symbols and imagery serve to pull the reader into the poem and makes them feel the same inability to hold onto reality that the speaker experiences. The poem’s ending is unclear, and the ambiguity of the speaker’s fate further conveys the terrible helplessness of a mental collapse. “I felt a Funeral in my Brain” surpasses Dickinson’s usual theme of death, it implies that there is something worse

out there: madness. Indisputably, Dickinson succeeds in her goal to replicate the experience of a true breakdown.

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### Works Cited

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And mourners, to and fro,

Kept treading, treading, till it seemed  
That sense was breaking through.

And when they all were seated,  
A service like a drum  
Kept beating, beating, till I thought  
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And then I heard them lift a box,  
And creak across my soul  
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